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DECORATIVE ART AS A BASIS OF MODERN COSTUME



IN red, green, orange, yellow, blue, or minor tones from autumn orchards, sheathed in spangles that have stolen their color from the fishes, beplumed with aigrettes, threaded with gold, draped in gauze, beringed, multi-colored, bejeweled, caparisoned, there now arises—precious gem in the casket that the delicate, though bold, taste of the masters have prepared for her—the modern woman, a new expression of the Primitive.

This movement, which has given the impulse to woman's fashions, is only a slender branch (a charming one, it is true) of the ramified and versatile tree of which decorative art has taken the form—decorative art or rather supplementary art; that is to say, one which needs a solid basis in order to be appre-

ciated; architecture in general or everything that springs from it, gardens, furniture and other derivatives.

In this irresistible outburst, which is evident in all branches where artistic activity can thrive vigorously, is there a fundamental idea and is this debauch of style-creation, of new lines, of glaring colors, based on new foundations? If so, whence comes the undeniable solidity of these foundations?

In art, as in everything else, radical innovation does not arise from nothing and gradual evolution alone produces the overflow of the vessel after water has been poured into it drop by drop. Only then is it seen that it was full. The period of incubation is ended; now art should live. At the caprice of a gust of wind, at the accidents of a

declivity, the water spread either infiltrates through good ground which it fertilizes or, meeting the impermeability of schists and rocks, tries in vain to subsist, becomes stagnant and evaporates. Sometimes, however, the abundance of the stream and its force of penetration get the best of the stone and find beyond, after more or less long laborious delays, the necessary soil and loam.

All the attempts of the second part of the XIX. century have had one of these three results. Space is lacking here to undertake even a summary recital of the analogous movements that preceded.

Without discoursing of the romanticist movement, as so allied to its contemporary in literature, which was so well illustrated by Delacroix that one cannot have a grudge against him, and of which the success was so complete, let us merely point it out, for it is from it that Impressionism* evolved in the person of Edouard Manet, a pupil of Couture. With him and following him, in spite of his repeated endeavours with the Salons Nationaux—balked by facts and then balked by opinions—arises the well-known Pleiad of impressionist masters: Monet, Pissaro, Sisley, Berthe Morisot, etc. . . . It may be said of this movement, which found at the start such violent opposition, manifesting itself especially in furious press campaigns, that in order to conquer and to command decisive respect it needed the burning faith and the enlightening truth with which it was animated.

Thirty years later, advancing a step

*The word impressionism nevertheless does not come from Manet. It was given on account of a canvas by Claude Monet, the title of which was "Impression."

further the formula of Impressionism, giving to color a preponderant place to the detriment of drawing, already neglected by their predecessors, was born the school of Neo or Post-impressionists, with its leaders, Gauguin, Cézanne and Van Gogh. Of these works only one thing can be said; that is, that the shrewd commercialism of collectors and the speculation in them alone saved them, happily, from the contempt and derision in which public taste held them and generally speaking still holds them.

The clamor of public opinion had already been raised against the former. Naturally it was necessary to give it a chance to strike harder. Efforts to this end, however, did not achieve the desired result and that which did not frighten the public greatly amused it.

At the magic touch of an artist of great worth and of great intelligence, Picasso, there was born a school, exclusive and perhaps sincere in the beginning, Cubism, the very intimate nature of which did not admit of positive criticism. Would the first cubists have lasted along with their technique, inspired as if by visions of hell, using only colors of gloom and desolation? Perhaps; but the rising tide of those, not feeling anything yet nevertheless having a presentiment of the new trend, who followed the furrow traced rather by hunger for notoriety than by thirst after an ideal, within three years in the midst of the wild joy of all its enemies (and there were plenty of them both in advance of and preceding the movement) overthrew Cubism, hardly emerged from its swaddling clothes. Cubism did not produce Futurism, which stands as its most deadly enemy

and boasts of having killed it. But the errors germinating in persons' minds developed into illogical principles and theories.

Futurism, tired of the inert fictions of painting throughout the ages, rejecting painting in two dimensions, seeks to create it of three dimensions, naïvely forgetting that to realize it there is only a plane surface. It gives it mysterious titles: painting of moods, musical painting, and puts madly on canvas (in no figurative sense) its ulterior ideas.

Beautiful, beautiful ideas. Pushing further these conceptions so daring, the Futurists seek to give a conception of their work, to give it in their minds the composition, the color and the spirit that agrees with it, and to stop there. That does not permit of material realization. Of what use to them then are the limited objects named, why the colors, the brushes, the knives and the canvases?

The very excesses of these schools, with the exception of a few attempts, which were moreover abortive, would forbid their admittance to Decorative Art which seeks its path simultaneously in simplicity of line and wealth of color, which necessarily implies the very intense study of composition.

Where can be found the origin of this impulse which was first timidly manifested ten years ago and how can its success and the esteem in which it is held be explained?

The obvious cycle of Fashion, which after having exhausted the diverse formulas suggested by different epochs, is returning inevitably and fortunately to the Greek, which it had already reached at the end of the XVIII. century. And there may likewise be found

its cause in the vague and remote presentment pervading the atmosphere that the day is perhaps not far distant when processes purely and photographically mechanical will seize in their entirety a rose on its stem or the flight of clouds to transfer them to paper or silk, to plaster or wood.

Hence there is an immediate necessity, since it needs time to prepare the public taste, to depart from the formula realized in part by decorators of recent years, a formula of precision, of moulding, of the relief, the formula in short of the sincere copyist.

Next efforts were directed towards the ingenuousness and simplicity of the Indo-Persian arts. The Persian miniatures of the XVII. and XVIII. centuries, wisely gathered in precious collections, concealed from the eyes even of those who drew their inspiration from them, have long directed the movement. The Persian, in spite of itself, unfortunately, by approaches too easily understood, led taste towards Orientalism (and the ensuing confusion) and the bad Chinese, the Japanese of the bazaar, the hideous Turkish (if one does not blend with it the tone so delicate of the XVIII. century) mixing with it, the effort collapsed of itself in bad taste and rubbish.

This desire for simplicity in lines persisting, one was next led in ascending to their very sources to the three formulas of occidental art,* directly related to each other, the Egyptian, the Chaldean, the Greek.

Egyptian art, the greatest of all it we consider the undisturbed and vast dynasties over which it reigned with

*In opposition to the Oriental movement, China, Japan, India, in which the points of similarity in the older dynasties are more-over striking.

its primordial idea of priestly government! Some persons do not see in the polychromous and affected manifestations of the Egyptian epitaphs and tombs (the only useful productions which remain for us) a proof of the condition of the mind of this people, its nightmare of death and the need of exorcising it by making figures of the dead person and diverting to these manikins the blows of genii and perhaps side-tracking them. Hence those methods of contending with them, embalmments, pyramids, mummies, hypogea and labyrinths. I do not think that the sole idea of death was able to give to this art the power of composition and the vigor which is manifest in it. I have at present in mind a certain head engraved in relief on the interior of a tomb (Museum of the Louvre) which breathes felicity and of which the technique of proportions appears to me perfect.

Alongside of Egyptian art and from it was born Chaldean art, the resemblances of which to its senior prevent mistaking its origin. The same technique, the same conventionalism carried still further in the strained anatomical indications in animals and persons, the same love of various planes of relief. It was from these formulas that Greek art was born—a purely ethnical phenomenon, considering the very extended commercial relations between Greece and the population of the eastern part of the Mediterranean.

This was the masterful art of the VI. and V. centuries before Christ, of which there only remain for us two forms of expression, the sculptures and the paintings or little frescoes on the an-

tique vases which constitute the glory of the Museum of the Louvre.

With a technique as beautiful and as strict as its Egyptian ancestor, Greek art refines the hierarchism of the hypogea (an influence due doubtless to the magical climate of the country) but preserves always that free choice of style through which it finds the means of expressing all sensations and all conditions of the mind.

It is especially in that collection of "Choreæ," kept in the museum of the Acropolis at Athens, that one may see to what a degree this art (which appears at first sight inert) on the contrary, with its trace of the mysterious and enigmatic owing to its congealed smiles and its void looks, contains within itself the infinite gamut of human joys and sufferings.

It is towards this repose that the favour of modern masters is at last turning, tired of the overdoing and unbridled recent schools, towards those simple attitudes whose decorative quantum resides in the principle that everything, even and above all the human body, should contribute to decoration (technique of design in sculpture, suppression of foreshortening in painting because adapting itself to a plane surface.)

The movement, still quite in its inception, is manifested in striking fashion in its different branches: in the positive sculpture of Bourdelle, in the elaborate decoration of Paul Iribe and in the personality, so remarkable, of Paul Poiret.

Taking his inspiration from the genial Englishman, Aubrey Beardsley, but rendering him elemental, the artist Paul Iribe, by his conceptions in a

mannerism which at first appeared to be excessive, was not long in making an impression by the grace of his lines and by the masterfulness which he was able to give to his strokes, of which one really cannot guess the process.

Paul Iribe in his work subordinates everything to decoration and his predilection for felicitous curves is so intense that he sometimes, and how willingly, sacrifices to them the reality if he finds it not in harmony with his fancy as to color and design.

In a truly lofty order of ideas the evolution of Bourdelle appears as the finest example of a return to the archaic. A pupil and admirer of Rodin, from that master he borrowed amplexity, then strong in a craft strangely powerful, he became charmed by the schematic figures of the Acropolis, of which his present work breathes the splendid souvenir. He has just realized in marble that one would wish to be eternal a work of unique execution and grandeur, the bas-reliefs of the théâtre des Champs Elysées of Paris. From this

mighty conception emanates a repose and a nobility such that even those who are astonished by these figures, taken from beyond our fatigued humanity, in its presence are seized with various emotions, among which vaguely but certainly springs admiration.

In the domain so familiar of dress and furniture Poiret casts in turn his mark, quite new and quite colorful. Who can tell the enjoyment, the softness, the cosiness, the delicacy of feeling that are evoked by the mere sight of a gown, a rug, a piece of furniture that has come from the hands of this great artist.

Everywhere, in every direction, from now on, this movement should lead the public taste towards these reawakened conceptions.

Outside of the fantastic schools, the chief defect of which is that one can no longer distinguish in them the unnatural from reality, archaism with its simple lines and brilliant colors now arises in all its beauty on the magnificent pathway of contemporary art.

